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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
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SUBJECT: UAE PLANS BIG SPLASH TO OPEN FRENCH NAVAL PRESENCE

Sensitive but unclassified; please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The UAE leadership will send a loud message with the May opening of a French naval facility in Abu Dhabi, amplified by the presence of headliners like French President Sarkozy. Adding a new military presence to the strategic equation reasserts the UAE's welcome to Western partners. Sarkozy's calendar apparently determined the date of the event, and his visit is likely to address nuclear, economic, and cultural cooperation as well. An associated conference may bring other big names to the party. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Locally based think tank INEGMA (Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis) may have assumed it had a small ceremonial project to arrange when it was charged with planning the May 25, 2009 opening of a new (250-man initially) French naval presence in Abu Dhabi, but the group learned that the UAE leadership seeks a large event to send a clear message: Abu Dhabi is diversifying its military cooperation with Western powers as part of an overall security strategy. Three primary audiences for this message may be UAE nationals across the seven Emirates (who should expect more Western presence even as the nation struggles to define its national identity in the midst of an 80% foreign population), the larger Gulf (including Iran), and the USG (not the sole "defender"). The UAE continues to value Western military capabilities and sees advantages in diversification. (Note: The UAE already hosts the US and a handful of other contingents of various sizes. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) Underscoring the centrality of messaging, the UAEG (or more specifically, Abu Dhabi) set the date of this event based on the availability of French President Sarkozy, not on completion or operation of the naval facilities. With Sarkozy's calendar clarified, the UAE declared that the base would be "ready" on time. With 600-plus attendees to include French dignitaries, NATO brass (perhaps the SecGen), and representatives of other regional and European nations, the stage is set for pomp and ceremony.

¶4. (SBU) Of course, Sarkozy usually visits with more than one message, so beyond base openings there will likely be movement on nuclear cooperation and other economic ties. (Note: May fits the rough time frame the Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation will be receiving final bids on a \$30 billion plus nuclear technology tender, which French firm Areva is actively pursuing. End note.) Sarkozy will also reportedly use the trip to break ground on the new Louvre planned for Saadiyat Island, which the French Embassy is proud to assert has not been impacted by the economic downturn. (Note: The military presence, Louvre, and nuclear plans are all initiatives of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) INEGMA is also preparing a conference on "Enhancing Maritime Security through Broader Cooperation" as a drawing card for many of the traveling dignitaries, to feature Sarkozy as a keynote speaker, joined potentially by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop

Scheffer and perhaps inviting the CENTCOM Commander.  
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